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ABSTRACT

Although many teachers force-feed the "meaning" of poetry to puzzled students or teach poetry by way of dissecting poetic techniques, more productive approaches to the study of poetry exist, as reflected in the literature in the ERIC database. Units of study can be organized around particular kinds of inquiry instead of around a literary genre or the themes of particular pieces. Readers can approach a poem by asking, "What does this say?" or "What does it matter?" Poetry can also sharpen thinking skills and teach children to deal with propaganda. In adult literacy education, the ambiguity of some poetry allows adult students to explore language in a non-threatening manner, since it invites unique explications rather than finding a right answer. The study of poetry can also be a suitable preparation for the study of law by teaching students to analyze language, recognize ambiguity, and develop consistency in interpretation--skills needed in the study of law. All of these approaches promote instruction that places responses to poetry within the control of students, who might shy away from poetry under teachers who lecture, quiz, and dictate a poem's meaning and significance. (MM)

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Teaching Poetry

Generating genuine, meaningful responses

by Charlie Frankenbach

Charles R. Duke (1984) has noted, "English teachers have given some attention to aesthetic reading, usually terming it the development of literary appreciation, but many of the classroom practices used to foster that appreciation have been counter-productive." Instruction on comprehending and appreciating poetry has especially been regarded as ineffective. Either because of a lack of appreciation for their students' abilities to study poetry or because of well-intentioned enthusiasm to show students the wonders of the form, many teachers have force-fed "meanings" to puzzled students or have taught poetry by way of dissecting poetic techniques—here is a symbol, here is a metaphor, and so on.

The literature in the ERIC database, however, offers many ideas on useful, more productive approaches to the study of poetry as the several samples discussed here illustrate.

Letting poetry serve each reader

In an article focused on all literature, not just poetry, Bryant Fillion (1981) argues that a teaching approach that promotes student inquiry is one way to sharpen the three abilities he sees as essential to a student's "capacity to read and derive benefit from literature." These abilities are aesthetic reading (when attention is focused on what happens during the reading rather than on what remains afterwards), reflecting, and problem finding (p.40).

Fillion urges that students be provided with opportunities to identify a poem's relevance to their lives. He suggests encouraging the student to generate his or her own questions about the text and points out how this supports an inquiry approach in the classroom.

For instance, Fillion suggests that English courses or units of study could be organized around particular kinds of inquiry instead of around a literary genre or the themes of particular pieces. He would encourage young readers to develop a literal comprehension of a poem by asking, "What does this say?" With selections likely to provoke varied student interpretations, students should ask "What does this mean?" The question "What does it matter?" is appropriate in studying selections that deal with concerns apt to be of keen interest to adolescents (p.44). Such questions, Fillion asserts, allows students "to examine and develop strategies" while pursuing these and other central questions, such as "How should this be read?" and "What is there to say about the character development in this piece?" (p.44)

Encouraging poetry reading as inquiry

Duke (1984) also discusses the need for an inquiry approach to reading, enjoying, and understanding poetry and echoes Fillion's emphasis on encouraging problem-solving and reflection. Duke stresses the danger of teachers championing

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the beauty and fruitfulness of a poetic reading experience while relying on a teacher-centered question and answer period: "...if we do not also provide equal time for students to enjoy, contemplate, and relive the experience of reading a text, we may be sending a contradictory message about what the purpose of literature study is." (p.3)

It is interesting to weigh this perspective when examining sources in the ERIC database related to the teaching of poetry writing (Morgan, 1989). Frequently an emphasis on form or other techniques that have become counterproductive in teaching the reading of poetry provide successful frameworks for teaching the writing of poetry.

The strength of Duke's article is a detailed description of an exercise with Robert Frost's "Storm Fear" that puts the inquiry approach into action. The first steps emphasize reflection, as students recall their own experiences in storms and express their recollections in class periods dedicated to free writing. Then, as vividly as they can, students condense the description of a storm into two sentences, which also must indicate their reaction s to it. Next students compare and contrast their sentences with the first two sentences of Frost's poem and write summaries of the similarities and differences between their lives and Frost's in terms of emotions, descriptive detail, voice, and style.

This first immersion in the poem is followed by group discussions which allow the students to question each other's summaries and, later, to continue analyzing the poem itself. A final writing project re-emphasizes reflection by allowing students to write on another subject.

Using poetry to develop critical readers

The usefulness of poetry in teaching elementary and secondary school children to deal with propaganda is proposed by Fehl L. Shirley (1983). In contrast to both Fillion and Duke, Shirley, who offers only general teaching suggestions, places little emphasis on the life-enriching quality of poetry. Rather Shirley sees the study of poetry as one stage of the process of sharpening thinking skills that are important in responding to various types of advertising. Poetry, Shirley asserts, helps students recognize the function of connotation, denotation, symbolism, and imagery. Knowledge of these techniques, Shirley argues, is integrally related to critical thinking, and students can use this knowledge effectively in confronting the "language of commercial and political persuaders." (p.1)

Francis Kazemek's work on the usefulness of studying poetry balances an intense appreciation for poetry with an in-formative, practical outlook both on how to present poetry in the classroom and on how such study can benefit students. In one of his papers on poetry and adult literacy (1985), Kazemek argues convincingly that adult literacy training should begin with the reading of poetry and other more expressive text. This argument is founded on Kazemek's contention that 1) literacy is not a process that can develop over a short period of time, and 2) such an assumption sets adult students up for disappointment. Thus Kazemek questions a traditional approach to adult literacy training that reduces reading comprehension and instruction to a focus on certain types of surface language conventions in a very restricted range of situations. The resulting "survival" literacy training (p.333), he argues, is short sighted.

The ambiguity of much poetry invites adult students to explore language "in a non-threatening manner," Kazemek argues, because it invites unique explications rather than finding a *right* answer. After immersion in the "compressed and symbolic world inside lyric poems," students "have been better able to move out from poetry to other functions of reading and writing." (pp.334-335) Like Fillion and Duke, Kazemek underscores the necessity of promoting group discussion and questioning and reflecting by students.

Using poetry with adult readers

In a later paper, Kazemek and Rigg (1986) suggest prerequisites for using poetry in teaching adult learners and recommend four specific poets whose works can be effectively used in such instruction: Carl Sandburg, Lucille Clifton, Langston Hughes, and William Carlos Williams. Kazemek and Rigg feel that these poets provide adult literacy teachers with a wealth of useful material because many of their poems are brief, are relevant to adult life, and are written in recognizable language—often in the vernacular.

Kazemek and Rigg strongly recommend reading poetry aloud, rereading it, and discussing it. These activities, they note, give life to the poetry,

reveal the many worlds within a poem, and allow students to judge their own interpretations against those of other students. Such poetry study, Kazemek and Rigg found, provides students with a smooth, rewarding entrance into the world of reading and it is simply "more fun" than the materials usually used in adult classes (p.225).

In still another article, Kazemek (1987) continues his argument regarding the need for learners to have more purposeful encounters with literature. In this spirited paper, he deftly criticizes educational practice that belittles the role of imagination by concentrating on the development of quantifiable skills. Kazemek takes successful swipes at "arid," "archaic" English instruction that "flies in the face of decades of research" by directing "language and literature learning through formulated phrases, pinned and wriggling on the classroom walls." (p.22) He peppers his paper with snatches of Williams' poetry and warns that the contemporary view that imagination is superfluous will eventually retard the human ability to imagine "the possibilities of transforming, of recreating, social realities." (p.23)

Using poetry to train law students

Gopen (1984) argues that the study of poetry is the most suitable preparation for the study of law. His intriguing stance hinges on four central points:

1) No other discipline so closely replicates the central question asked in the study of legal thinking: "Here is the text; in how many ways can it have meaning?"

2) No other discipline communicates as well that words are not often *fungible*—a legal term that suggests here that words are often irreplaceable or at least cannot be replaced by syno-nyms without changing the shade of meaning.

3) No other discipline concentrates as much on the effects of the ambiguity of individual words and phrases.

4) No other discipline concentrates as much on a concept that might be called "textuality"—a focus that leads to very close, careful reading that considers writer/author intent. (p.334)

The study of poetry, Gopen believes, "free[s] the mind to accept the approach of reasoning that law schools try to teach." (p.334) Law students must know how "to analyze language, to recognize ambiguity, and to develop consistency in interpretation" (p.337); and, Gopen points out, the study of poetry can help students sharpen these types of skills: "To understand the law is to understand the possibilities of texts, and that is precisely the province of the study of poetry." (p.347)

Gopen presents a convincing case, drawing on his extensive knowledge of both poetry and the law; he intertwines comments in Keats, Blake, and Shakespeare with legal case histories. In addition to its novel approach, this article is also a helpful resource for exercises to be used with Shakespeare's well-known Sonnet 73 and Blake's "London"—exercises that in their investigation of ambiguity and context resemble the inquiry approach favored by Fillion and Duke. And as Shirley does, Gopen—for all the obvious delight he takes in poetry—de-emphasizes the personally enriching quality of the poetic experience in his quest to defend more practical reasons for studying poetry.

In varying degrees, these articles all promote instruction that places responses to poetry within the control of students, who are apt to shy further away from poetry under teachers who lecture, quiz, and dictate a poem's meaning and significance.

Another consistent feature of these articles is the lack of substantial evidence of the effectiveness of poetry in sharpening reading and thinking skills. Authors such as Duke, Fillion, Kazemek, and Gopen report some success with their approaches. But as Fillion points out, "...although [these skills] may be observed indirectly, in their use these abilities are not quantifiable. We can assess their development, but we cannot measure them with precision." (p.40) Indeed, what these articles call for is a "leap of faith," if you will, on the part of teachers willing to try, observe, and judge for themselves the possible effectiveness of such approaches.

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